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**A short Sketch on some Signs of Transformation  
in Brazilian Urban Imaginary**

This brief sketch has to do with a phenomenon that may come to have important developments in a country like Brazil with large gaps between social classes and a perverse persistence of economic inequality. I am referring to the new cultural developments that come from the periphery and are beginning to enter into dialog and to intervene with mainstream culture. The examples are countless. Funk rhythms take over FM radio stations and middle-class parties. *Cobertores (Blankets)*, a sold-out show about the reality of homeless children directed by choreographer Carmen Luz, with a cast of youngsters from the Andaraí slum, plays to unexpected success. The world of fashion bows to the style of slum artists. A novel such as *Cidade de Deus (City of God)* makes the bestseller list and its film adaptation is nominated for an Oscar.

In this scenario, at least one thing is making itself clear: a new element is reformatting our cultural paradigms and spreading throughout the urban landscape of Brazilian cities. Examining my increasingly heavy folder of newspaper clippings, I began to work with this new phenomenon from a critical point of view.

At this point, I noticed the first issue that this material raises, one that signals the importance of the new cultural expressions currently emerging from the peripheries of the large cities. After dedicating my entire life as a researcher to identifying the possibilities of resistance and political challenge of the cultural production that followed the 1960s rebellions and their repercussions, I feel uncomfortable and insecure when faced with the challenge of defining a position from which to study such manifestations. For the first time in my middle-class scholarly experience, I found myself in trouble. Therefore, I decided to employ the utmost prudence in positioning myself in this new arena.

In a broader sense, we still do not have a sound critical body of studies on the cultural production of the urban peripheries. The few existing works analyze such cultural production either from the perspective of social and cultural inclusion or they deal with the impact of its strong presence on the media. However, I do not intend to move along in any of these directions. What interests me here is a very specific and limited matter: the connections, appropriations and debates generated between the cultural mainstream and the cultural manifestations of the urban peripheries. It is worthwhile to point out the specificity of the composition of social forces in Brazilian culture, where social inequalities and wealth distribution continue to be unsolved problems, creating a real gap between elite and popular cultures. What I intend to do here is just focus on a few ongoing cultural crossovers.

Regarding my methodology, I decided to revisit two of my older and most persistent objects of study: the first one being the articulations between culture and politics and the second the creation of alternative means for cultural production.

I'll begin with the first one. It is a known fact that black militancy in Brazil never succeeded in becoming well organized due to several complicating factors such as the movement's internal divisions, the obstacles to prioritizing racial issues when faced with demands related to class inequalities, or the challenges of facing national beliefs that always tend to overlook the existence of a strong racism pervasive in our daily lives.

It is true that after 1988, the centennial of the Abolition of Slavery in Brazil, there was an increase in political awareness concerning specific racial issues. Nevertheless, it can be said that black movements in Brazil, in spite of some unquestionable progresses, never succeeded in creating a critical and political body that could in fact represent the large percentage of blacks and mestizos in Brazilian society.

But today, new black generations are not merely engaged in the preservation of their history or in the affirmation of racial pride. Going much further, they are also strongly addressing issues of social exclusion suffered by low-income populations, consisting mostly of blacks, mestizos and migrants.

The frontline selected by these young movements is activism within the arts, with a strong commitment to social transformation. The activity (or *attitude* as it is called), is now experienced simultane-

ously as art and as a way of intervening in their poor communities. The most significant media used by this youth is hip-hop, an artistic genre that includes five forms of expression: MC, Rap, Break dance (the bboys), Graffiti and Knowledge.

I will briefly explain the latter, since it is a significant and relatively new element in Brazilian hip-hop. A key element of hip-hop aesthetics is to raise awareness and to value local history and racial roots, which brings up the need for information and knowledge. Organic knowledge – whether academic or not – is now being experienced as an element of the hip-hop culture, validating some of its agents as voices of the periphery. New organic intellectuals are increasingly present in public spaces giving interviews, taking part in both national and international seminars and congresses, and producing academic papers and university theses. In the public arena, the outstanding activists include DJ Marlboro, Mano Brown, MVBill, Ferrez and José Junior among many others. The academic pioneers of Brazilian hip-hop are Écio Salles (from the Afro Reggae group), Ericson Pires (from the Hapax group) and Alexandre Vogler (from the Radial group).

Coming back to hip-hop, the most frequent criticism heard in Brazil is that it is “Americanized”, that it has nothing to do with the “root” culture.

I cannot resist making an aside here about the clear similarity of this critique with the one that used to be made against black movements in the 1960s and 1970s, equally accused of being a North American import.

Having pointed this out, I shall continue with two observations on the supposedly “foreign” character of local hip-hop. One is about the questioning raised by these movements of the very notion of a national culture. The political activism and the anger expressed by the hip-hop idiom seem to sprout not merely from a supposedly foreign cultural trend but above all from the awareness that hip-hop is able to articulate a supranational forum of poor and black youths who wish to raise the banner of global resistance. Seen from this viewpoint, hip-hop echoes somewhat the more sophisticated tone and logic of recent World Social Forums.

The second point comes from the eclectic character of rap in Brazil. From a rhythmic viewpoint, Brazilian RAP is a merging of the

genre born in Jamaica and raised in New York ghettos with the sound of pagode, samba, frevo, maracatu, axé and even bossa nova, without specifically privileging any of these beats or tunes, in the best hybrid style of Néstor Garcia Canclini.

From the viewpoint of political emphasis, a few adaptations were also made. For instance, there is a quite eloquent local reading for the RAP acronym. In English, RAP is the abbreviation for Rhythm and Poetry. In its Portuguese translation, RAP became the abbreviation for Rhythm, Attitude and Politics.

Among its practitioners, the hip-hop *attitude* is called the *gangsta revolution*, whose goal is to build community awareness within the panorama of violence and poverty found in urban peripheries. One of the axes of the hip-hop political project is pedagogic action instead of aggressive confrontation. Most of the time this means intensive release of information and provision of access to culture, both now seen as basic rights of all citizens and identified as a strategic factor for any project of social transformation.

The new black consciousness acts in groups, sells a lifestyle and generates financial inputs, so as not to depend entirely on the State. There are some successful examples, such as Afro Reggae (in this sense an exemplary group) or the siblings MV Bill and Nega Gizza, activists of CUFA (Slums Central Union, which gathers 326 Rio de Janeiro slum communities), where Rap is practiced as a means of showing the precarious living conditions of slum-residing blacks. Nega Gizza leads two quite aggressive radio shows, being the first woman to have a talk show of this kind on an FM radio station. MV Bill, in the video clip *Soldados do Morro (Slum Soldiers)*, denounces in national broadcast by means of shocking images the drama of teenagers with heavy loaded machine guns working for drug dealers. An important fact shown coast to coast, since 90% of this kind of work is done by children and teenagers, starting from nine years old.

Today, there are thousands of hip-hop groups all over the country, setting the tone for this new political profile which is creating conditions for the concrete visibility of racial claims in Brazil.

I would not like to close the hip-hop subject without mentioning a “phenomenon inside the phenomenon”, that is, the very strong role that women play in this area. There are many well-known hip-hop women, such as Tati Quebra Barraco, Nega Gizza, Ana Cristina,

Monica, Kelly, Danielle and others. They include rappers, who use a very politically minded idiom, and *funkers*, who have a rebellious attitude. Among the latter, Tati, the pioneer, stands out. Tati is the first woman to break the barrier of male-only *funkers*.

Tati Quebra-Barraco's performance – whose artistic name literally translates a slang euphemism for “the act of sexual intercourse” – both seduces and shocks. She comes onstage, shoots out sentences filled with strong sexual meaning, breaks down prejudices, demands equality between men and women, and stirs the public into frenzy.

In private life, Tati never gives interviews. She is married, the mother of three children and, in her own words, a dedicated wife and housekeeper. On stage, she turns into a hurricane woman who, similar to a machine gun, shouts war screams. Tati, a role model for other *funkers*, is a “funk girl with attitude”, who screams and mimics forbidden porno situations and boasts about her freedom and power.

It is easy to foresee the controversies generated among the feminists by *funkers*' performances. A women's movement from São Paulo, the Geledes, has carried out some work with female *funkers* about the reproduction of male chauvinism and the reactionary contents of their lyrics. This initiative has certainly given them an increased awareness of what they are singing about, but has not succeeded in changing their ways. Tati and her followers continue with what they see as an appropriation of the sexual brutality surrounding their lives.

In opposition to the *funkers*, one finds the rappers. Led by Nega Gizza, who has the same empathy and success with the public, but whose lyrics avoid explicit sexual appeal to attract the audience, they reject both the funk which Gizza considers macho oriented, as well as American rap, which she calls “dribble music”. Gizza defines herself as a politically committed rapper and a hip-hop activist, as well as a feminist who fights in favour of revolutionary black woman.

Whether it is Tati, manipulating the system, or the warrior Giza, raising the flag of social change, it is clear that something is already in the air, promoting debates and political openings for low-income women.

Literature has also not remained immune to change. It is part of the Brazilian literary tradition that a great deal of attention is given to the themes of poverty, hunger, social inequalities and, lately, urban

violence. It is also part of our cultural tradition that intellectuals – in this case, writers – lean towards political engagement and social commitment. In Brazilian literature, the writer has always been the only voice to speak on and in favour of the poor and the excluded (in this sense there is an excellent work by Roberto Schwartz called *The Poor in Brazilian Literature*).

In 1997, however, our literary world was surprised by the publication of a novel that, in a short time, became one of the top Brazilian best sellers of recent times. I'm referring to *City of God*, by Paulo Lins, currently translated into numerous languages.

Paulo Lins brought a completely unexpected variable to our literary circles: poor people have a voice and can even write. Even more, they can write books that turn out to be a huge success with the public and critics. However, let us begin at the beginning.

Paulo Lins, a resident of the City of God slum, graduated from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and began to write his first poems while working as a high school teacher.

At a certain moment, he started working as a research assistant, writing ethnographies about City of God's community for Professor Alba Zaluar, who was doing research on urban violence. Since Paulo showed great difficulty in organizing his reports, Alba Zaluar suggested that instead he could make a literary narrative with the results of his findings. And so it was done. Eventually, Alba showed Paulo Lins's texts to Professor Roberto Schwarz who immediately detected the literary potential of Paulo's reports. He then suggested that Paulo write a novel using this material, and introduced Paulo to a leading publishing house (*Cia das Letras*). Paulo was enthusiastic with Schwarz's reaction but immediately realized the pioneering importance of the task ahead. He went into a panic. It was only through great effort and with the help of his main literary model, Dostojevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, that he managed to finish the novel.

Starting of from his close relationship with periphery communities that included lowlifes, outlaws and drug dealers, for the first time in Brazilian literature, we had a detailed anatomy of the daily life of poverty and crime in our country, now with the added flavour of genuine personal testimony. For the first time, the slums were no longer treated as idealized places separated from the paved streets, but as

places that contain the open violence and the nonconformity found in slums.

As a result of the unquestionable success of *City of God*, new roads were opened for creative writing. Maybe even a new canon has been as being generated.

In 2000, a new book of equal importance came out, although with a different impact from that of *City of God*. The book is *Capão pecado*, by Ferréz (pen name of Reginaldo Ferreira of Silva). *Capão pecado* – (pecado means sin in Portuguese) – paints a sophisticated portrait of Capão Redondo, a São Paulo neighborhood with one of the highest rates of poverty, violence, drug dealing and criminality, and where Ferréz grew up and still lives today. Its more than 200.000 residents do not have access to sewage systems, hospitals, or any type of medical assistance. Capão has the bloody rate of 86.39 murders for each 100.000 inhabitants, much above the national average, which is already stratospheric by international standards.

This book shows a higher level of integration with the hip-hop universe than its predecessor, *City of God*. Ferréz employed rap lyrics as a reference, with their mix of ghetto chronicle and summons of the brothers to action. A starting point quite different from the literary canon which had informed the making of *City of God*. In the book, we have the participation of Mano Brown (a rap celebrity, also a resident of Capão Redondo), who provides the epigraphs of each chapter of the book. The two of them, together, from then on became outstanding community leaders.

The second book by Ferréz, *Manual Prático do Ódio* (s. *Practical Handbook of Hate*) more aggressive than the first one, describes the dilemma of a generation marked by the sequels left by the lack of attention from the State as well as by the intensity of media impact in the poor communities.

The thing that surprises us most when reading Ferréz' books is a very unique displacement of the locus of violence. Instead of being the theme of the narrative, violence is now simply the daily reality of the characters themselves, who are no longer perceived as criminals but as commonplace people like any of us, with their individual emotions, their respect for family, feelings of love and jealousy, and dreams of a better future. This comes as a shock to readers who do not live in the scenery of crime, and provides an uncommon form of identification

or, at least, an understanding of the aggressor's character, non-existent in our literature until then.

After his success, Ferréz was granted a scholarship to study literature at an American university. He decided not to go. His refusal included the offer of a North American producer who attempted to buy the rights of *Capão pecado* for the cinema. Ferréz explained in a newspaper interview: "I write to be read by my community. My place is here. My war is here."

Committed to this war, Ferréz has created, in partnership with Mano Brown, the movement 1 DASUL, a cultural enterprise that, among other activities, has its own CD production company and a fashion brand called Irmandade (Fraternity).

Today, his fashion brand occupies a 65 square foot warehouse and has two other manufacturers, producing an average of 300 pieces a day. The *griffe* Irmandade, characterized by illustrations denouncing the system, has a store in downtown São Paulo and its production is distributed to seven Brazilian states, in addition to holding the distribution rights for fashion brands belonging to six other rap groups. The *griffe* Irmandade also prints monthly booklets for an anti-drug program and plans to open up a clinic for treatment of drug addicts. Ferréz has also organized two special numbers of the magazine *Caros Amigos* called "Marginal Literature", that gathers and publishes periphery writers, providing space for local talents.

In his own words him, Ferréz is engaged in the project of "breaking down the door" of literary history for those who come from the margins of society. He explains: Marginal literature is the one produced by those sections of society whose writings find no place within the canon. However, he warns: When we obtain something through art, it does not mean that we will calm down. What we have to do is to organize our hatred, directing it towards those who harm us. All the things that the system has denied us we must take. This statement uttered by Ferréz brings up the main subtext of new cultural projects being produced in the margins. For the first time in history, outloud and clearly, the poor state their desire and their right to consume the very same material and symbolic goods historically enjoyed only by the middle and upper classes. They want the latest model of Nike sneakers, as well as access to specialized information and high culture. This leads us to conclude that the greatest revolutionary novelty oc-



curing is, indeed, the emergence of a process towards a concrete democratization of expectations.

Another segment that has surprised most people is represented by the art collectives (roughly defined as gatherings of visual artists who meet around a specific cause or project and who use art forms other than those of graffiti, the official visual expression of hip-hop culture).

The collectives began to appear at the end of the 1990s and perform interventions in the urban space.

Quickly, such interventions, also in the spirit of “the urgent thing is to act”, began to take a political stance of social denunciation, now in the streets and public plazas. Simultaneously, such works discuss the very structure of production within the framework of art circuits and art markets. In the self-definition of collectives, one notices a symptomatic proximity to Antonio Negri’s notions of “crowd”, “work-affection” and “life-art”.

These collectives, which are spreading in exponentially throughout Brazil, bring something new with them. Collectives are not coops, they are also not groups, they do not have a fixed number of participants, nor could they be characterized simply as artistic movements.

Very much on the contrary, the organization of collectives is rhizomatic and nomadic, which marks their difference within the art segment. Collectives are formed merely to meet the challenges of one or more projects. They are created for a specific end, and soon afterwards are recomposed with new participants, in another project. This means that the composition of a group is not fixed, but mobile. An artist can take part in a group due to a given project, and in the next project he may join another group for the accomplishment of another project.

Communication among collectives happens quite intensely through blogs and discussion lists on the Internet. Some sites gather information in a more nodal way, better exemplifying the network logic that rules this production. There is, for instance, the site <[www.redecoro.zip.net](http://www.redecoro.zip.net)> (a blog with information about sites) and the network of art theoreticians on the site [www.artesquema.com](http://www.artesquema.com). Collectives are financially independent and informal units, self-managed, decentralized and flexible. For each project, the collectives search for sponsorship, offer courses, sell products or perform services such as illustration, design, video etc. In this lies their uniqueness.

According to participants in some of these collectives, they were the result of necessity, not desire. Their banner is: "That which is urgent is real."

A good example is the action "Occupation within Occupation". For three weeks in December 2003, 120 artists performed an intervention at the Prestes Maia Building, located in downtown São Paulo, which had been occupied by 470 families from the Downtown Homeless Movement (MSTC). In that action, the artists performed works in cooperation with the homeless, promoting interaction between artists and MSTC members, thus giving the intervention a sense of redress or amendment.

This form of art is known as "artivism", a hybrid of art and activism. Or, as they themselves ironically call it, "arrivismo", which, according to the Portuguese dictionary means "the behaviour of those who aim to improve their social status at any cost".

The priority given to political actions reminds us of the aesthetics of rap, graffiti and marginal literature, previously addressed herein, whose form of political engagement is to stress immediate action and the aggressive release of information.

We should also call attention to the fact that the production of a group does not value individual artistic production. The author of the artwork is always the collective entity, not the artist x, y, or z. A brief manifesto has been signed by Túlio Tavares, participant of the group A Nova Pasta (The New Folder), which included one single artist.

The creation of this group with only one participant is not simply an act of nonsense. The implicit idea in the creation of this group is the denial of that which the artist calls "umbiguismo" (Umbigo in Portuguese means navel) meaning self-centeredness, or better saying, is related to a criticism of the ideas of individualism and the need for authorship and authenticity that structures the modern art market.

At this point, we have touched a sensitive point concerning the effect of the collectives. The broadest questioning of the notions of authorship and intellectual property.

At a time when free software and digital inclusion are being discussed in industrial and social forums under the motto "good knowledge is shared knowledge", a similar claim appears in avant-garde art: the copyleft movement. This movement deals with what is called "creative plagiarism", "cut up aesthetics" or "sampling".

Led by artists and writers, the copyleft want to allow the reproduction of works, as long as they remain “open”. Debates promoted by the copyleft movement have generated some advancement as well as the regulation of creative collectives – a flexible legislation for literary and artistic works. There are licenses such as “some rights reserved”, “recombination”, “public domain”, and many others. Copyleft and creative collectives are juridical innovations meant to not only overcome piracy but also to emphasize a sense of a cultural “factory” in order to create and promote social and artistic cooperation.

There is also the strategic use of media, which proposes new means of using television, radio, video, web sites, publications and other types of electronic media in order to give voice to minorities, alternative communities, political dissidents and street artists.

Well, the results that will be achieved by all these claims and questionings, in terms of a change in the structure of social forces in Brazil, are not easy to foresee. However, this production has already had an important side effect.

Historically seen as a “Divided City”, Rio de Janeiro, the city from where I observe this phenomenon, has begun to open channels between territories that were formerly impenetrable.

The Brazilian middle class is starting to demonstrate an unexpected interest in hip-hop aesthetics and attitudes. In the wake of such interest, a new form of political participation for artists and intellectuals is emerging, related to urban periphery communities and centred in the logic of solidarity action – also called ‘*brodagem*’ in hip-hop dialect (which means, acting as a brother).

Characterizing the emergence of a new form of intellectual engagement, artists abandon the rhetoric of protest and the role of spokespersons for the excluded, beginning to interact directly with the communities, bringing informal professional education to places where formal knowledge does not penetrate. Consequently, an important network to exchange cultural skills and values is emerging. The political motto of this moment is, “To act is the important thing to do”.

Some examples of *brodagem* are well known. Waly Salomão and Caetano Veloso, after a terrible slaughter in the slum of Vigário Geral, climbed the hill and helped to create the Afro Reggae Cultural Centre. The Centre offers art, music, poetry, and philosophy workshops.

Rosane Swartman and Vinícius Reis, film directors, created a centre of cinema studies in the Nós do Morro, at the Vidigal slum Gringo Cardia, a well-known artist and set-designer, has been heading the Show Factory School since June 2000, a school that intends to capacitate low-income teenagers who wish to become actors, ballet dancers, fashion designers, carpenters, sound operators and set designers.

Rosana Palazyan, a visual artist, works with the inmates of João Luiz Alves, a house of correction for youngsters that trains teenagers arrested for armed assault, homicide and drug dealing. The results of her work are exhibited in important galleries and museums.

Tetê Leal, a sociologist, created Copa Rocca in the Rocinha slum to train dressmakers, fashion designers and entrepreneurs. Today Copa Rocca employs over 100 people, sells its products to leading local fashion brands, takes part in international fashion shows, exports to Selfridge's and Galerie Lafayette, and works in cooperation with well-known artists such as Antônio Dias, Ernesto Neto and Carlos Vergara.

I would like to stress the point that these actions are not in any way charity-oriented endeavours. They are business oriented, and indicate cultural exchanges and joint authorships that result in products displaying a plural composition of skills, styles and aesthetics.

On the other hand, and equally important, is the fact that cultural and social exclusion as an issue, and hip-hop as a style have strongly permeated the city's artistic production and cultural events.

As an issue, it is easy to observe the redirecting of the current national film production and the prestige of films such as *News of a Private War* (Notícias De Uma Guerra Particular), by João Moreira Salles, *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*), by Fernando Meirelles, *Carandiru*, by Hector Babenko, *The Bus 174* by José Padilha, *The Rap of the Little Prince Against the Greasy Souls* (*O Rap do Pequeno Príncipe Contra as Almas Sebosas*) by Paulo Caldas e Marcelo Luna or *Yellow Mango* by Claudio Assis.

As a style, a recent example is the huge success of Fashion Week 2004 in Rio de Janeiro, at the Museum of Modern Art, where the usual ethereal and Caucasian look of the top models was replaced by the black beauty of carioca gangs that entered the catwalk to applause, wearing designer clothes of prestigious fashion brands such as Andréia Saleto and *Blue Man*.

This type of exchange, so hard to measure critically, is not exempt from the possibility of reinstating the old appropriation trick, where mainstream culture appropriates new marginal cultural forms. However, and being optimistic, it is difficult that in a rigidly structured class society such as the Brazilian one, the ongoing cultural inoculation between classes, ethnicities and antagonistic interests does not generate political benefits in the medium and long term.

Intellectual activity itself is now seeking (and maybe finding) its place in this new cultural landscape.

Maybe our old reactive trenches are being transformed into active movements in favour of an ethic- and solidarity-oriented globalization.

Maybe those trenches and their policies of ambiguous tolerance are already being replaced by new forms of action and articulation among the academy, artists, NGOs, unions and associations, thus dissolving old corporate equations into new, and even urgent, ways of making politics.

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